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W. E. B. Du Bois

The Congress of Arts and Sciences at St. Louis last summer served to emphasize painfully the present plight of Sociology; for the devotee of the cult made the strange discovery that the further following of his bent threatened violent personal dismemberment. His objects of interest were distributed quite impartially under some six of the seven grand divisions of Science: economics, here; ethnology, there; a thing called "Sociology" hidden under Mental Science, and the things really sociological ranged in a rag-bag and labeled "Social Regulation." And so on.

This document is based on the typewritten, signed manuscript in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and Archives section of the W. E. B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The manuscript adheres to style conventions prevalent when Du Bois composed it. In particular, it follows the convention of capitalizing key terms, as well as now antiquated rules of punctuation. Except in those very few instances where confusion in meaning is likely, I have decided to preserve the tone of the manuscript by adhering to its original style and have refrained from updating it. I am thankful to David Graham Du Bois and the W. E. B. Du Bois Foundation for providing permission to publish "Sociology Hesitant." I also thank the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and Archives of the W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. *Ed.*

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A part of this confusion of field was inevitable to any attempt at classifying knowledge, but the major part pointed to a real confusion of mind as to the field and method of Sociology. For far more than forty years we have wandered in this sociological wilderness, lisping a peculiar patois, uttering fat books and yet ever conscious of a fundamental confusion of thought at the very foundations of our science—something so wrong that while a man boasts himself an Astronomer, and acknowledges himself a Biologist, he owns to Sociology only on strict compulsion and with frantic struggles.

And yet three things at the birth of the New Age bear weighty testimony to an increased and increasing interest in human deeds: the Novel, the Trust, and the Expansion of Europe; the study of individual life and motive, the machine-like organizing of human economic effort, and the extension of all organization to the ends of the earth. Is there a fairer field than this for the Scientist? Did not the Master Comte do well to crown his scheme of knowledge with Knowledge of Men?¹

Yet this was not exactly what he did, it was rather what he meant to do, what he and we long assumed he had done. For, steering curiously by the Deeds of Men as objects of scientific study and induction, he suggested a study of Society. And Society? The prophet really had a vision of two things, the vast and bewildering activities of men and lines of rhythm that coordinate certain of these actions. So he said: "Now in the inorganic sciences, the elements are much better known to us than the Whole which they constitute; so that in that case we must proceed from the simple to the compound. But the reverse method is necessary in the study of Man and of Society: Man and Society as a whole being better known to us, and more accessible subjects of study than the parts which constitute them." And on this dictum has been built a science not of Human Action but of "Society," a Sociology. Did Comte thus mean to fix scientific thought on the study of an abstraction? Probably not—rather he meant to call attention to the fact that amid the bewildering complexities of human life ran great highways of common likenesses and agreements in human thoughts and action, which world-long observation had already noted and pondered upon. Here we must start the new science, said the Pioneer, this is the beginning. Once having emphasized this point, however, and Comte was strangely hesitant as to the real elements of Society which must sometime be studied—were

1. The reference is to French philosopher Isidore-auguste-marie-françois-xavier Comte—Auguste Comte—(1798–1857), who is credited with the founding of positivism and giving the science of sociology its name and establishing its systematic methodology. *Ed.*

they men or cells or atoms or something subtler than any of these? Apparently he did not answer but wandered on quickly to a study of "Society." And yet "Society" was but an abstraction. It was as though Newton, noticing falling as characteristic of matter and explaining this phenomenon as gravitation, had straightway sought to study some weird entity known as Falling instead of soberly investigating Things which fall. So Comte and his followers noted the grouping of men, the changing of government, the agreement in thought, and then, instead of a minute study of men grouping, changing and thinking, proposed to study the Group, the Change, and the Thought and call this new created Thing Society.

Mild doubters as to this method were cavalierly hushed by Spencer's verbal jugglery:² "we consistently regard a society as an entity, because though formed of discreet units, a certain concreteness in the aggregate of them is implied by the general persistence of the arrangements among them throughout the area occupied."

Thus were we well started toward metaphysical wanderings—studying not the Things themselves but the mystical Whole which it was argued bravely they did form because they logically must. And to prove this imperative there was begun that bulky essay in descriptive sociology which has been the stock in trade of formal treatises in this science ever since. And what is Descriptive Sociology? It is a description of those Thoughts, and Thoughts of Things, and Things that go to make human life an effort to trace in the deeds and actions of men great underlying principles of harmony and development—a philosophy of history with modest and mundane ends, rather than eternal, teleological purpose. In this line, Spencer and his imitators have done good, inspiring, but limited work. Limited, because their data were imperfect—woefully imperfect: depending on hearsay, rumor and tradition, vague speculations, traveller's tales, legends and imperfect documents, the memory of memories and historic error. All our knowledge of the past lay, to be sure, before them. But what is our knowledge of the past as a basis for scientific induction? Consequently the Spencerian Sociologists could only limn a shadowy outline of the meaning and rhythm of human deed to be filled in when scientific measurement and deeper study

2. The reference is to English sociologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who was an early advocate of Darwin's theories and laid the foundation of social Darwinism. Although Du Bois critiques Spencer for metaphysical psychologism, he is generally received as having advocated the preeminence of the individual over society and of science over religion. *Ed.*

came to the rescue. Yet here they lovingly lingered, changing and arranging, expressing old thoughts anew, invent[ing] strange terms; and yet withal adding but little to our previous knowledge. This sociologists were not slow to see, and they looked for means of escaping their viscious logical circle, but looked only in the direction of their going, and not backward toward the initial mistakes. So they came to the essay of two things: they sought the help of biological analogy as a suggestive aid to further study; they sought a new analysis in search of the Sociological Element. The elaborate attempt to compare the social and animal organism failed because analogy implies knowledge but does not supply it—[it] suggests but does not furnish lines of investigation. And who was able to investigate “Society”? Nor was the search for the ultimate Sociological Element more successful. Instead of seeking men as the natural unit of associated men, it strayed further in metaphysical lines, and confounding Things with Thoughts of Things, they sought not the real element of Society but the genesis of our social ideas. Society became for them a mode of mental action, and its germ was—according to their ingenuity—“Consciousness of Kind,” “Imitation,” the “Social Imperative,” and the like.

All this was straying into the field of psychology, and fifty years ago these wanderers might have been welcomed. But today psychology has left behind the fruitless carvings up of consciousness and begun a new analysis and a new mode of measurement. This new psychology has scant welcome for sociological novices. It might be historically interesting to know whether our social thinking began with this idea or that, or proceeded by that combination of thoughts or this—but how shall we ever know? And knowing, what is such knowledge worth?

But enough of this. Let us go back a bit and ask frankly: Why did Comte hesitate so strangely at the “parts which constitute” Society, and why have men so strangely followed his leading? Is it not very clear that the object of Sociology is to study the deeds of men? Yes, it is clear—clear to us, clear to our predecessors, and yet the very phrasing of such an attempt to reduce human action to law, rule, and rhythm shows how audacious was the plan and why scientists even have quailed before it and, veiling their words in phrases, half-dimmed the intent of their science.

For the Great Assumption of real life is that in the deeds of men there lies along with rule and rhythm—along with physical law and biologic habit, a something Incalculable. This assumption is ever with us; it pervades all our thinking, all our science, all our literature; it lies at the bottom of our conception of legal enactments, philanthropy, crime, education, and ethics;

and language has crystallized the thought and belief in Ought and May and Choice. Now, in the face of this, to propose calmly the launching of a science which would discover and formulate the exact laws of human action and parallel "Heat as a mode of motion" with a mathematical formula of "Shakespeare as pure Energy," or "Edison as electrical force"—simply to propose such a thing seemed to be and was preposterous.

And yet [no matter] how much so even the formulation of such a science seemed unthinkable, just as insistently came the call for scientific knowledge of men. The New Humanism of the 19th century was burning with new interest in human deeds: Law, Religion, Education—all called men to a study of that singular unit of highest human interest, the Individual Man. A Categorical Imperative pushed all thought toward the Paradox:

1. The evident rhythm of human action;
2. The evident incalculability in human action.

What, then, is Sociology. Simply an attempt to discover the laws underlying the conduct of men.

Why, then, is it called Sociology? It ought not to be but it is, and "what's in a name?"

Why do not Sociologists state their object simply and plainly?

For fear of criticism.

The criticism of whom?

Of the physical scientists on the one hand who say: The laws of men's deeds are physical laws, and physics studies them; of the mass of men, on the other hand, who say: Man is not wholly a creature of unchanging law, he is in some degree a free agent and so outside the realm of scientific law. Now whatever one's whims and predilections, no one can wholly ignore either of these criticisms: If this is a world of absolute unchanging physical laws, then the laws of physics and chemistry are the laws of all action of stones and stars, and Newtons and Nortons. On the other hand, for a thousand and a thousand years, and today as strongly as, and even more strongly than, ever, men, after experiencing the facts of life, have almost universally assumed that in among physical forces stalk self-directing Wills, which modify, restrain, and re-direct the ordinary laws of nature. The assumption is tremendous in its import. It means that, from the point of view of Science, this is a world of Chance as well as Law; that the conservation of energy and correlation of forces are not universally true, but that out from some unknown Nowhere bursts miraculously now and then controlling Energy. So utterly inexplicable are the facts thus assumed that they are sel-

dom flatly and plainly stated. Protagonists of “free” will are found to be horrified deniers of “Chance.” And strenuous defenders of orthodox Science are found talking as though the destinies of this universe lie largely in undetermined human action—indeed, they could not avoid such talk and continue talking.

Why not then flatly face the Paradox? [Why not] frankly state the Hypothesis of Law and the Assumption of Chance, and seek to determine by study and measurement the limits of each?

This is what the true students of Sociology are and have been doing now a half century or more. They have adopted the speech and assumption of humanity in regard to human action and yet studied those actions with all possible scientific accuracy. They have refused to cloud their reason with metaphysical entities undiscovered and undiscoverable, and they have also refused to neglect the greatest possible field of scientific investigation because they are unable to find laws similar to the law of gravitation. They have assumed a world of physical law peopled by beings capable in some degree of actions inexplicable and uncalculable according to these laws. And their object has been to determine as far as possible the limits of the Uncalculable—to measure, if you will, the Kantian Absolute and Undetermined Ego. In this way, our knowledge of human life has been vastly increased by Statisticians, Ethnologists, Political Scientists, Economists, Students of Finance and Philanthropy, Criminologists, Educators, Moral Philosophers, and critics of art and literature. These men have applied statistical measurement and historical research to the study of physical manhood and the distribution of population by dwelling, age, and sex; they have compared and followed the trend of systems of government and political organization; they have given long and minute study to the multitudinous phenomena of the production and distribution of wealth and work; they have sought to reduce philanthropy to a system by a study of dependents and delinquents and especially by a study of the social outcast called the criminal. Even in higher and more difficult regions of human training and taste, something of systematic investigation has been carried on.

In all this work, the unit of investigation has frankly been made the Individual Man. There have been attempts to replace this troublesome element with something more tractable, as in the case of the pliable and law-abiding “Economic Man,” where a being warranted to act from one motive without erratic by-play was created. But common sense prevailed, and real men were studied—not metaphysical lay figures. Again, these students of

human nature have repeatedly refused to be thrown into utter confusion by the questions: Is this a science? Where are your natural laws? What sort of a science is a science without laws? Without undertaking to answer these disturbing questions or to falsify the facts for sake of a glib rejoinder, these students have been content with pointing out bare facts, general rules and principles, and moral advice; they have neither accepted human life as chaotic nor have they lightly assumed laws, the existence of which they could not prove. They have insisted that we must study men because men are the greatest things in the known universe, and they have also fearlessly accepted the fact that the "Ought" is the greatest thing in human life.

Not that their work has been perfect. It has been open to two great criticisms: lack of adequate recognition of the essential unity in the various studies of human activity, and of effort to discover and express that unity; and a hesitancy in attacking the great central problem of scientific investigation today—the relation of the science of man and physical science.

What then is the future path open before Sociology? It must seek a working hypothesis which will include Sociology and Physics. To do this it must be provisionally assumed that this is a world of Law and Chance. That in time and space, Law covers the major part of the universe, but that, in significance, the area left in that world to Chance is of tremendous import. In the last analysis, Chance is as explicable as Law: just as the Voice of God may sound behind physical law, so behind Chance we place free human wills capable of undetermined choices, frankly acknowledging that in both these cases we [con]front the humanly Inexplicable. This assumption does not in the least hinder the search of natural law, it merely suspends as unproved and improbable its wilder hypotheses; nay, considering some of the phenomena of radio-active matter, electrical energy, and biological development, perhaps the incubus of the assumed Conservation of all Energy would be removed to the great relief of future physics.

On the side of Sociology, this proposed hypothesis would clear away forever the metaphysical cobwebs that bind us and open the way for a new unified conception of human deeds. We would no longer have two separate realms of knowledge, speaking a mutually unintelligent language, but one realm, and in it physical science studying the manifestations of force and natural law, and the other, Sociology, assuming the data of physics and studying within these that realm where determinate force is acted on by human wills, by indeterminate force.

Some such reconciliation of the two great wings of Science must

come. It is inconceivable that the present dualism in classified knowledge can continue much longer. Mutual understanding must come under a working hypothesis which will give scope to Historian as well as Biologist.

Finally, it remains to point out that such a restatement of hypothesis involves a restatement of the bases of Sociology.

Suppose now we frankly assume a realm of Chance. What, then, is the program of Science?

Looking over the world, we see evidence of the reign of Law; as we rise, however, from the physical to the human there comes not simply complication and interaction of forces but traces of indeterminate force until in the realm of higher human action we have Chance—that is actions undetermined by and independent of actions gone before. The duty of science, then, is to measure carefully the limits of this Chance in human conduct.

That there are limits is shown by the rhythm in birth and death rates and the distribution by sex; it is found further in human customs and laws, the forms of government, the laws of trade, and even in charity and ethics. As, however, we rise in the realm of conduct, we note a primary and a secondary rhythm. A primary rhythm depending, as we have indicated, on physical forces and physical law; but within this appears again and again a secondary rhythm which, while presenting nearly the same uniformity as the first, differs from it in its more or less sudden rise at a given tune, in accordance with prearranged plan and prediction and in being liable to stoppage and change according to similar plan. An example of primary uniformity is the death rate; of secondary uniformity, the operation of a woman's club; to confound the two sorts of human uniformity is fatal to clear thinking; to explain them we must assume Law and Chance working in conjunction—Chance being the scientific side of inexplicable Will. Sociology, then, is the Science that seeks the limits of Chance in human conduct.